

Perceptions about military service of women in Armenia



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The successful older generation and the distrustful and pessimistic young one

In-depth interviews with both women and men in the military have revealed some specific perceptions of military service of women in Armenia. Specifically, middle-aged and older women believe that their choice of a career in the military has been rather successful, and they are satisfied with the progress they have made in their careers. Whereas many of the younger women interviewed think that taking up a military profession has not been a success, and they color the present and future of their careers in much darker tones. Expectations of some younger women have not been met, and they intend to leave the military profession with the first chance they can get. Middle-aged and older women joined the armed forces at its inception and many did so with their husbands. They have stepped up to higher military ranks since, and today hold comparatively higher positions. They do not see any critical contradictions between their careers and other social roles. In contrast, younger women make only their first steps in a military career. They point out certain conflicts between their service and the expected role of women in the Armenian society. Therefore, it is not surprising that the older generation believes that the role of women in the armed forces, their status and the opportunities are almost equal to those of men.

However, the initial findings of the study among high school students and their parents show that perceptions of differ drastically among various clusters of middle-aged and older women. Those in the military have rather positive perceptions of women's military service, whereas women outside the military hold disparate opinions. Overall, the latter's perceptions are rather negative. The prevalent perception is that objectively, women and men cannot and should not have the same rights and opportunities in the armed forces. According to a generally held belief, the currently limited opportunities of career advancement for women is quite justified and even preferable.

“Not my child! As to yours, why not?”

Many respondents among the group of parents justify their negative attitudes towards military service of women by incompatibility of traditional and military roles of women, considering military service a threat to the prosperity and strength of the woman's family. Another argument is that serving in the same military environment causes a number of difficulties and challenges, including relations regulated by the military statute. One of the major issues respondents point out is women's capability to manage male subordinates, especially in combat units. Another issue mentioned is the perceived conflict between a military service and the reproductive function of women, which, according to the students and parents, can challenge the demographic situation as well, especially if military women suffer combat casualties.

Concerned pragmatism of girls and the stereotypical position of boys

Students, especially girls note that in case certain conditions are available, women will be more willing to serve in the military. For instance, students think that women's service should be arranged somewhere near their communities and families, and possibly far from bordering regions and tranches. Military service and specifically the compulsory duty should extend only for 6 to 12 months maximum, and preferably, women should spend the nights at home. Students believe that it is essential to ensure the equal involvement of both girls and boys in the lessons of military preparation, and the transfer of adequate knowledge and skills on armaments and boot camp skills. They believe it is important to consider gender differences and subsequently, to provide a gender-sensitive military service. It is crucial to establish an adequate environment for the military service of women, including hygiene issues.

The majority of male students object to women holding high-ranking positions in the military, and insist that even in all female units the commander should be male. In peaceful times they see women only in “the kitchen and behind a clerk's desk”. However, both the students and their parents think that the



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presence of women at war is welcome. In general, they have a very vague understanding of military service. Even families that have a member in the military hold generic, stereotypical perspectives of military service, which often are erratic. Therefore, it is not surprising that students and parents are challenged to specify the conditions necessary for women to serve in the military. Often the negative attitudes are not even supported by any argument, especially among male students. This, however, does not affect the intensity of their perceptions.

The Russian military base located in Gyumri is perhaps the best source for finding good evidence to compare perceptions about the military service of women, as it allows Armenians to get in touch with the realities of both Russian and Armenian military service and personnel. For instance, according to the respondents, military personnel in the Russian units demonstrate a more “proper” behavior that should characterize a military servant, compared to those in the Armenian units. The first are more disciplined outside the military base as well.

Adequate conditions, trust, training, communication and education

Summarizing the initial findings of the study, a number of conclusions can be drawn. First, it is obvious that many perceptions of women’s military service are based on the issues and challenges of service and discipline in the Armenian armed forces in general; and the related perceptions and stereotypes in the Armenian society. This can explain the predominant preference for a possibly short period of military service close to one’s community. Second, perceptions are influenced by the availability of necessary conditions and infrastructures, which would enable women to serve in the military, and the expectations of what these should be. The third factor affecting perceptions is the trust towards military service, which is conditioned by the above-mentioned two issues. This is not the trust towards the capabilities of the armed forces, or its effectiveness, but the trust that adequate conditions for women’s military service are in place. Fourth, it is important to emphasize the fact that attitudes towards military professions are not yet established. Finally, perceptions about the military service of women are largely defined by the overall gender issues in the Armenian society.

These initial findings already provide a ground for outlining a number of policy recommendations aiming at the development of a more conducive environment for the women willing to serve in the military. Obviously, these recommendations will be fine-tuned once the final findings are available.

First, in order to extensively increase the level of women’s engagement in the Armenian armed forces, it is necessary to ensure the success of military reforms; continuously improve the infrastructures and discipline in the military; and transform the current perceptions and stereotypes about military service.

Second, it is necessary to study the international experience, and to involve professionals in order to develop a mid-term programme on establishing and developing gender-sensitive conditions and infrastructures in the military. The programme should be complemented with a subsequent plan of action and a concrete communication mechanism that will consistently inform the public of the outcomes of these actions.

Third, it should be acknowledged that without special opportunities for training career advancement of women in the military would be extremely limited. In order to expand these opportunities, to increase the level of trust towards military service, to enhance predictability of military careers, and to support women in harmonizing their military careers and family roles, it is necessary to radically improve opportunities of professional development for women, in parallel with reviewing specific legal challenges impeding their career advancement, including normative acts.

Finally, both in primary and secondary educational institutions it is necessary to implement projects and activities that promote equal rights and opportunities for both men and women, with special attention to basic military training in high school.

The paper is elaborated based on the opinions passed by the participants of the discussion “Perceptions among female military personnel, high school students and parents related to military service of women in the Armed Forces of the Republic of Armenia”, which took place on 31st of July, 2014. The roundtable discussion was attended by independent analysts, government officials, and representatives of the international organizations.

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